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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC 0136  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC 0286

C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000893

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/01/2018  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [UZ](#)  
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: TWO MORE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IMPRISONED

REF: A. TASHKENT 500  
    [1](#)B. TASHKENT 865  
    [1](#)C. TASHKENT 819  
    [1](#)D. TASHKENT 878  
    [1](#)E. TASHKENT 777  
    [1](#)F. TASHKENT 749

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On July 29, the Forum 18 website reported that two Jehovah's Witnesses in Margilan were convicted of teaching religion illegally on July 23 and imprisoned. On August 1, two Jehovah's Witness representatives confirmed the Forum 18 article with poloff and noted observing several irregularities at the trial of the two men in Margilan. Separately, Forum 18 reported that a Protestant in the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic faces five to fifteen years' imprisonment on religious extremism charges. While religious freedom appears to be improving for Uzbekistan's Muslims, the vast majority of the population, these cases demonstrate that it continues to deteriorate for religious minorities, particularly those like the Jehovah's Witnesses and certain Protestant groups which are viewed as engaging in missionary activity. End summary.

FORUM 18 REPORTS IMPRISONMENT OF TWO JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES  
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[1](#)2. (U) In a July 19 article, the Forum 18 website reported that two Jehovah's Witnesses from the Ferghana Valley town of Margilan - Abdubannob Ahmedov and Sergey Ivanov - were convicted of teaching religion illegally on July 23 at the Margilan Town Criminal Court and sentenced to four years' imprisonment and three and half years' imprisonment respectively. In addition, the article notes that another Jehovah's Witness from Margilan, Nazira Rahmanova, was fined one million soums (758 dollars), while four others - Svetlana Shevchenko, Aziza Ismanova and Raya Litvinenko - were given three-year suspended sentences.

13. (U) As noted by the Forum 18 article, the sentencing of Ahmedov and Ivanov brings the total number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbek prisons to four. Olim Turayev, a Jehovah's Witness from Samarkand, was sentenced to four years' imprisonment at a labor camp in April on similar charges (ref A). In 2007, a Jehovah's Witness congregant from Samarkand, Irfan Hamidov, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for teaching religion illegally.

#### JEHOVAH'S WITNESS REPRESENTATIVES CONFIRM FORUM 18 ARTICLE

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14. (C) On August 1, Jehovah's Witness representatives Sergei Artyushkov and Igor Morozov confirmed the Forum 18 article and provided poloff with a copy of the verdict against the two men. Artyushkov explained that Ahmedov was originally arrested after police raided his home earlier this year. He was subsequently charged with two separate administrative offences for possessing illegal religious literature and conducting an illegal religious meeting. Rather than being fined, he was later told by authorities in April that he would face criminal charges for teaching religion illegally. Ivanov was charged under the same criminal code. Artyushkov explained that both men have already begun serving their sentences at a labor camp near Margilan. The Jehovah's Witnesses planned to appeal the verdict by August 2.

#### JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES ALLEGE TRIAL IRREGULARITIES

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15. (C) Artyushkov attended the trial in Margilan and reportedly observed several irregularities. Authorities refused to allow the Jehovah's Witnesses' defense lawyer, Jamshid Fayzullaev, to represent the two men in court because he was not officially licensed. Authorities then pushed Akmedov and Ivanov to accept a court-appointed lawyer, which they refused, believing that he would not adequately represent their interests (Note: Court-appointed lawyers in Uzbekistan have been frequently accused of collaborating with prosecutors. End note.) The trial against Akmedov and Morozov went ahead without any defense counsel and prosecutors refused to share any of the evidence against them. In addition, Artyushkov noted that the only individuals who testified against Ahmedov and Ivanov at trial were law enforcement officials. Other witnesses were called to testify, but they reportedly did not support the claims of the prosecution. Similar irregularities had been observed during the trials of Hamidov and Turayev (ref A).

16. (C) Comment: Artyushkov explained that Fayzullaev, who practices civil law in Tashkent, has a law degree from Russia that is not recognized in Uzbekistan, and he is therefore unable to be licensed as a defense counsel. Previously, Jamshid was able to defend other Witnesses in court, including Turayev and Hamidov, as an unlicensed "public defender." During a recent conference with Uzbek human rights activists and lawyers, poloff was told that the criminal code was recently amended so that only licensed lawyers could defend individuals in court (septel). They speculated that the change was not aimed at improving the professionalism of defense attorneys, but rather was meant to keep human rights activists, who often serve as "public defenders," out of the courtroom. End comment.

#### PUNISHED FOR ATTEMPTING TO REREGISTER CONGREGATION?

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17. (C) Artyushkov observed that one of the main complaints raised against the two men at trial was that they were allegedly attempting to "recreate" the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Ferghana province. Artyushkov explained that the Jehovah's Witness congregation in nearby Ferghana City, only 7 kilometers from Margilan, was deregistered in 2006. Members of the Ferghana congregation included Margilan residents. Artyushkov said that the Jehovah's Witnesses have not officially applied to re-register their Ferghana congregation, but they have informally discussed the possibility with local officials. Artyushkov observed that

members of the Jehovah's Witness congregation in Bukhara were recently threatened after they attempted to register, and he was afraid that the imprisonment of Ahmedov and Ivanov was possibly meant as a warning to the Jehovah's Witnesses not to further pursue the re-registration of their Ferghana congregation. Artyushkov further noted the absurdity of deregistering a religious organization, which makes any religious activity by its members illegal, as if people could simply abandon their religion overnight.

#### MEETING AT RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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18. (C) Morozov and Artyushkov explained that they met on August 1 with Religious Affairs Committee Deputy Bekzod Kadyrov, who said that he knew nothing about the case but offered to investigate their allegations. Artyushkov explained to poloff that the Jehovah's Witnesses have made great efforts to accommodate the government's concerns about proselytism and was no longer distributing literature in Uzbekistan or meeting in groups larger than ten outside of their one registered meeting hall in the town of Chirchiq in Tashkent province. However, he noted that none of these efforts has been recognized so far by the government, which does not appear to be interested in any type of compromise with the Jehovah's Witnesses.

#### HAMIDOV REPORTEDLY MOVED AGAIN

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19. (C) Artyushkov reported that Jehovah's Witness representatives have been recently able to visit both Turayev and Hamidov, who appear to be in good health. Turayev is currently imprisoned at the Gazalkant labor camp near Samarkand, where Hamidov was also originally held. Artyushkov explained that authorities recently transferred Hamidov yet again to another prison camp in Jizzakh province. Earlier this year, authorities transferred Hamidov to prisons in Tashkent and Navoi provinces after accusing him of violating internal prison regulations at Gazalkant (ref A). After the Jehovah's Witnesses successfully contested Hamidov's transfers in court, he was eventually returned to Gazalkant (ref B). According to Artyushkov, authorities have not yet explained why Hamidov was transferred again to Jizzakh province. He speculated that authorities might have charged Hamidov again with violating internal prison regulations in order to invalidate him from a rumored September amnesty (Note: Authorities frequently charge political prisoners with violating internal prison regulations as a means of denying them amnesty. Poloff also has heard rumors of a possible September amnesty from several human rights activists. End note.)

#### PROTESTANT FACES EXTREMISM CHARGES IN KARAKALPAKSTAN

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110. (U) In a July 14 article, Forum 18's website reports that Aimurat Khayburahmanov, a Protestant from Nukus in the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic, faces criminal trial of illegally reaching religion and participating in a "religious extremist" organization. According to the article, Khayburahmanov faces between five and fifteen years' imprisonment. Local Protestants reportedly told Forum 18 that Khayburahmanov has been beaten in pre-trial detention.

111. (U) Poloff will travel to Nukus next week and will attempt to find out more about the case. Poloff will also meet with individuals defending human rights activists Akzam Turgunov and journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov (ref C), who are also currently detained in pre-trial detention in Karakalpakstan (Note: Karakalpakstan presents one of the most difficult environments in the country for both human rights activists and religious minorities. According to Christian leaders, there are currently no registered Protestant churches in the entire region. End note.)

#### COMMENT

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¶12. (C) While religious freedom appears to be improving for Uzbekistan's Muslims, the vast majority of the population (refs D and E), these three cases demonstrate that it continues to deteriorate for religious minorities, particularly those like the Jehovah's Witnesses and certain Protestant groups which are viewed as engaging in missionary activity. The imprisonment of the two Jehovah's Witnesses marks an escalation of a recent campaign against such groups, which included the recent airing on state TV of a documentary savagely attacking Jehovah's Witnesses and several Protestant groups (ref F). We will raise our concern with government officials that religious minorities engaged in peaceful religious practice continue to be persecuted and imprisoned in Uzbekistan. We will also note that such actions are especially counterproductive in the light of Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford's continued negotiations with the government on steps it can take to improve religious freedom.

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